



## CREED OF COMPASSION

RENOWNED EVANGELIST URGES PEOPLE OF FAITH TO PROTECT EARTH AND ITS ANIMALS

**MATTHEW SLEETH HAD** it made. He was an emergency room doctor and head of a hospital's medical staff. He and his wife and two children lived in a big house. But one night, while they were vacationing on an island off Florida's coast, watching the sunset, his wife, Nancy, challenged him: "What's the biggest problem in the world?" When he responded that it was the destruction of the environment, the extinction of species, and the pollution sickening and killing many of his patients, she asked, "What are you going to do about it?"

Sleeth's search for an answer eventually led him to open a Bible he found in the hospital. Reading it, he became convinced that God calls people to do whatever is necessary to care for creation. So he left his job, and he and his family sold most of their possessions. They now live in a townhouse in Lexington, Ky., where they hang their clothes in the garage to dry. Sleeth and his wife lecture and write books. His first—*Serve God, Save the Planet*—turned many evangelical Christians into environmentalists. His latest—*24/6*—is about the importance of the day of rest the Bible calls the Sabbath.

Throughout his talks and books, Sleeth expresses concern for animals. That's led the Sleeths and their organization, Blessed Earth, to work with The HSUS's Faith Outreach program, encouraging people and institutions of faith to focus on animal welfare. In 2013, the Sleeths invited HSUS staff to speak at a food and faith conference at Duke University, and The HSUS and Blessed Earth cohosted lunches for North Carolina ministers. Sleeth gave a sermon on factory farms at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., praising The HSUS's work to protect animals raised for food.

"The Sleeths are the real deal," says Christine Gutleben, senior director of faith outreach. "They're authentic; they're effective; they get it."

In this edited interview with senior writer Karen E. Lange, Sleeth talks about what he learned growing up on a small dairy farm near Frederick, Md., and how remembering the Sabbath can help people treat animals better.

### How did your childhood on a farm influence the way you see animals?

The cows had names; they had personalities. The measure of the farmer and the person was how well they cared for their animals. A farm was a healthy place that you could let children see. And all that's really changed. It's shocking: The first time I was in a confined animal feeding operation with a hundred thousand chickens in the barns, I was like, "You would not let a child in there."

**What brought us to this point?**

We've moved away from an agrarian society to an industrial one. People don't see how the chicken lives. It's in a cage where each bird has less space than a piece of paper, square-inch wise. The county fair, when I was a kid, was about how great of care you took of your animals. They glistened. People don't go to a county fair to see that anymore. I think we got disconnected—you know, if we have credit cards then we don't need God, or the farmer doesn't really matter.

**When you studied the Bible, what did it tell you about how people should treat animals?**

I saw a theme unfolding that was very consistent: that humans were to care for animals and to treat them with some dignity. There's a law that if your enemy's donkey is stumbling under a load, you're supposed to stop and help the donkey. And that isn't just one line. That plays out throughout the Scriptures.

Christ said that not a single bird falls from the sky without God taking notice—God groans, in other words, when the sparrow falls. He goes on to say that the sparrow's only worth a couple of cents, so how much more are you worth? And I think we kind of pop quickly to the, "Oh, we're worth much more than a sparrow." But I think what Christ was trying to say is, "How can you get your head around how much God loves you, unless you can first wrap it around how much he cares about this tiny bird?"

**What other verses spoke to you?**

In the book of Genesis [chapter 24], Abraham is looking for a spouse for his son Isaac. And so he sends his servant. Eleazar brings 10 camels, and he travels, and Rebekah and a group of women are at a well. And Eleazar says, "If this woman is the right

woman for Isaac, she will come over and not only worry about me being thirsty, but she's going to worry about the camels." And she comes and she gives Eleazar water. And then Eleazar sits down and watches her water the camels. Now, it takes—I looked this up—anywhere between 20 and 40 gallons to water a camel. Times 10 camels. So a minimum of 200 gallons of water. Well, the very next scene is that her brother Laban says, "Oh my goodness, we've got to get these camels in and get

them rubbed down and fed." And this is God's sign to Eleazar that these are decent people. Again and again, the good guys in the Bible are stopping and caring for animals.

**How is the idea of the Sabbath—of the day of rest God orders in the Bible—relevant to animal welfare?**

The fourth commandment, the Sabbath commandment, is the longest of the Ten Commandments, and it is the commandment that includes concern for animals. God has this ethic

of not only caring for ourselves but for also giving animals rest. When it comes to animals, we hold all the cards. This commandment says, "Yes, but you've got restraints on

you." And so, to me, an animal that might be in some kind of a confined situation—being raised where it can't turn around, where it can't see outdoors—the real commandment that we're breaking there is the fourth commandment.

**How has your concern for animals affected your lifestyle?**

Probably the biggest thing was: Where does our food come from? And are the animals connected to that being cared for properly? That really changed the way we consume. It's not

just an egg. How did the chicken live? I eat meat. But I'm careful about where it comes from. And I eat probably a tenth of what I did when I was 20.

**When people say that it's more important to focus on human concerns than animal welfare, how do you respond?**

They're inseparable. If we're the kind of people who worry about how animals are treated, we are by definition better people.

**ON THE iPad:** Watch a video of Matthew Sleeth at the Washington National Cathedral.



"Caring about where our food comes from ... is good for the soul," writes Matthew Sleeth in *Serve God, Save the Planet*.

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